

MELVILLE'S EMBLEMATIC IMAGINATION  
AS SEEN IN  
MOBY DICK

by  
MARGARET M. BOORMAN


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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH IN THE  
FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCE, THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA,  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS

Edmonton, Alberta

March, 1959.



## SYNOPSIS

This thesis begins with a consideration of the emblem proper, and of what may be called the emblematic imagination as it appears in the pages of a few great writers. On the basis of this discussion two principles of definition, applicable to all forms of emblematic expression, are proposed: first, that meaning is always approached through both sense impression and intellectual reflection; secondly, that the image and its meaning are always equated, not merged or fused to the point where the individual identity of either is destroyed. Chapter II makes a distinction between the emblematic symbol and two other types of symbols, namely, the analogical and the archetypal, all of which appear in Moby Dick. Chapter III first discusses emblematic elements in Melville's writing prior to Moby Dick, then considers two forces which contributed to the development of Melville's emblematic imagination: the philosophy of Transcendentalism and the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Chapter IV deals with the emblem in Moby Dick. The final chapter evaluates Melville as an emblematic writer and indicates the way in which his emblematic imagination found expression in original and creative ways.







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## CHAPTER I

### WHAT IS MEANT BY "EMBLEMATIC"

Herman Melville's Moby Dick is an absorbing tale of the search for the Great White Whale. But as the narrative unfolds it becomes evident that Moby Dick is much more than an adventure story related dramatically and realistically. One of its great fascinations lies in the way in which the events and circumstances of the voyage are constantly invested with symbolic meaning. In the chapter entitled "The Doubloon", there is this statement: "And some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher. . ."<sup>1</sup> It is the purpose of this thesis to investigate Melville's emblematic imagination as seen in Moby Dick, an imagination which constantly created or recognized "some certain significance" in the facts and experiences of the whaling voyage.

Before Melville's emblematic imagination can be studied to advantage, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by "emblematic". The relationship between Melville's emblematic writing and that of traditional emblem-writers is not immediately apparent. Early emblem-writers had practised a particular technique and observed a recognizable set of rules which had resulted in a device known as the true emblem. Later writers used the emblem, freely and creatively, as a subordinate, contributing technique within the context of a larger work, rather than as an independent device complete in itself.



In this first chapter we shall consider examples of emblematic writing from the work of a few selected authors in order to indicate something of the scope and possibility of the emblem. As the discussion proceeds the dominant characteristics of emblematic writing will be noted. At the end of the chapter I shall seek to establish two principles of definition by which the meaning of the term "emblematic" may be understood. These principles will provide the basis for our discussion of Melville's emblematic imagination.

The emblem, as introduced into England, commonly consisted of three major parts: the picture presented as a moral symbol, the motto which interpreted and completed the picture, and the poem or piece of prose which provided a more extended commentary on the picture and the motto, usually including a moral application or religious lesson. Thus the whole principle of emblem-writing lay in the presentation of picture to the visual sense and meaning to the intellect. Each depended on the other, yet neither was dominant. In the words of one of George Wither's emblems:

When you have heeded, by your Eyes of sense,  
This Helmet, hiving of a Swarme of Bees,  
Consider, what may gather'd be from thence,  
And, what your Eye of understanding sees.<sup>2</sup>

This double approach to meaning remained a characteristic of all emblematic writing.

The earliest collection of emblems in English is Geoffrey Whitney's A Choice of Emblemes, published in 1586, and it is from this book that our first example is taken. The woodcut picture depicts the traditional, allegorical figure "Occasion" with flowing forelock and winged





feet, standing upon a whirling wheel which is floating on a sea of waves. A razor is held in one upraised hand. The figure is static and lifeless, its qualities completely externalized and stylized. The total visual presentation is devoid of dramatic importance or impact. The interpretative verses illustrate the characteristic point-by-point correspondence established between the details of the image and the meaning ascribed to them:

What creature thou? Occasion I doe showe.  
On whirling wheele declare why doste thou stande?  
Bicause, I still am tossed too, and free.  
Why doest thou houlde a razor in thy hande?  
That men maie knowe I cut on everie side,  
And when I come, I armies can devide.

But wherefore hast thou winges uppon thy feete?  
To showe, how lighte I flie with little winde.  
What meanes longe lockes before? that suche as meete,  
Maye houlde at firste, when they occasion finde.  
Thy head behinde all balde, what telles it more?  
That none shoulde houlde, that let me slippe before.

Why doest thou stande within an open place?  
That I may warne all people not to staye,  
But at the firste, occasion to imbrace,  
And when shee comes, to meete her by the waye.  
Lysippus so did thinke it best to bee,  
Who did devise mine image, as you see. 3

The emblem as a whole is stiff and inflexible not only because of the stylized visual presentation, but also because of the arbitrary way in which significance of an abstract, impersonal nature is systematically deduced from the given details of the picture. The subject matter is typical of early emblems. Whitney had described his subjects as being of three kinds:

Historicall, as representing the actes of some noble persons, being matter of historie. Naturall, as in expressing the natures of creatures, for example, the





love of the yonge Storkes, to the ould, or of  
suche like. Morall, pertaining to vertue and in-  
struction of life, which is the chiefe of the  
three, and the other two may bee in some sorte  
drawn into this head. For all doe tende unto  
discipline, and morall preceptes of living.<sup>4</sup>

Acceptable material included personifications and abstract symbols,  
Biblical material, known moral lessons concerning the human soul  
and divine love, and anecdotes drawn from classical and historical  
sources, from books of jests and fables.

Thus early emblem-writers were severely limited by the require-  
ments of technique and selection of material. Yet if we may turn  
for a moment to Dante,<sup>5</sup> it becomes clear that in the hands of a  
skilled and imaginative writer, the emblematic technique could be em-  
ployed to rare advantage. Consider this passage from the Inferno:

Verily I saw and still have in mine eye  
A headless trunk that followed in the tread  
Of the others of that desolate company.  
And by the hair it held the severed head  
That in its hand was like a lantern swayed,  
And as it looked at us, "Oh me!" it said.  
Thus of itself a lamp for itself it made;  
And they were two in one and one in two;  
How this can be, He knows who is there obeyed.  
When it was just at the arch and close below,  
It raised its arm high and the head with it  
That it might bring its words the nearer so.  
Which were: "Behold now the most hard forfeit!  
Thou who still breathing goest the dead to view  
See if any forfeit cruel as this thou meet.  
And that thou may'st bear tidings of me true,  
Bertran de Born am I, who the young King  
Into the evil of my promptings drew.  
Father and son did I to quarrel bring.

. . . .

Such union since I made asunder come,  
I carry alas! dissevered this my brain  
From the live marrow it fed its vigour from.  
Thus retribution's law do I maintain.<sup>6</sup>



In this example the picture is verbal and imaginary. The violent image is so powerfully drawn that the significance may be felt as well as perceived.

Consider also the following example of a "compressed emblem" found in Shakespeare:

Out, out, thou strumpet, Fortune! All you gods,  
In general synod, take away her power;  
Break all the spokes and fellies from her wheel,  
And bowl the round nave down the hill of heaven,  
As low as to the fiends!<sup>7</sup>

Here Shakespeare uses the figure of Fortune's Wheel which had also appeared in the emblem books, but he gives to it a sense of life and vigor as he adapts it to the mood of the passage. In the next example Shakespeare again employs an image familiar to the emblematicists:

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks  
But bears it even to the edge of doom.<sup>8</sup>

Here the picture is not precisely drawn, for it is difficult to imagine a representation of "rosy lips and cheeks" coming "within his bending sickle's compass", yet the lines are essentially emblematic in that the idea of the passage of time is expressed in terms of concrete imagery.

Another interesting example of the emblematic quality of Shakespeare's writing is found in Hamlet, Act III, scene ii. The emblematic picture takes the form of the play-within-the-play, tropically entitled "The Mouse-trap". Recognizable resemblances have been created between the actions of the dumb-show and miniature play, and the facts of the larger drama. There is, then, an image and also a





suggested meaning perceived by the reader as he notes the way in which the "poisoning by ear", and the poisoner's successful wooing, in the play-within-the-play, stand for the "rotteness in Denmark" revealed to Hamlet in Act I, scene v. Thus in one of the most crucial scenes in Hamlet, the emblematic art is used to further both action and characterization.

The distinction between the rigidity of the emblem books and the creativity and freedom of emblematic expression as seen in Dante or Shakespeare should not be stressed unduly, for significant changes and developments in the direction of a freer, more individual approach appeared in the work of the conventional emblem-writers.<sup>9</sup> This tendency may be noted in the work of Francis Quarles, the editor of the second major emblem book to be published in England, Emblemes and Hieroglyphikes of the Life of Man, which appeared in 1639. Let us take as an example of Quarles' method the sixth emblem in Book Five, with its woodcut picture of a "squat little woman-figure with a loose gown, hair in a coil and bare feet" sitting on the "terrestrial ball".<sup>10</sup> She is gazing upward while she reaches toward heaven. In a poem of eight stanzas Quarles interprets the picture and points his lesson. The first four stanzas record the figure's love for the earth, air, sea and heaven. The fourth verse reads:

Without Thy presence earth gives no refection;  
Without Thy presence sea affords no treasure;  
Without Thy presence air's a rank infection;  
Without Thy presence heaven itself's no pleasure.  
If not possessed, if not enjoyed in Thee  
What's earth, or sea, or air, or heaven?





Although a woodcut still accompanies the poem and is essential to it, and although the meaning is deduced from the picture in detail, there are significant changes. Quarles succeeded in conveying a sense of living moment which contrasts with the static, lifeless quality of the earlier form. He replaced the traditional, allegorical figure representing an abstract idea, with a single, personalized figure relating an individual experience of the human soul in a subjective way. Thus Quarles initiated a literary approach to the emblematic form, a personal and psychological approach to emblematic meaning, with the result that the tone of the emblem was no longer didactic but rather lyrical and dramatic. Perhaps he was too interested in moral, religious and psychological truth to give full value to the "eye of sense", yet his technique is genuinely emblematic, for his ideas find literal expression in his presented pictures.

A further transformation of the emblematic device is evident in the poems of George Herbert. Consider, for example, "The Altar":

A broken altar, Lord, Thy servant rears,  
Made of a heart and cemented with tears;  
Whose parts are as Thy hand did frame;  
No workman's tool hath touched the same.  
A heart alone  
Is such a stone  
As nothing but  
Thy power doth cut.  
Wherefore each part  
Of my hard heart  
Meets in this frame  
To praise Thy name;  
That if I chance to hold my peace,  
These stones to praise Thee may not cease.  
O let Thy blessed sacrifice be mine,  
And sanctify this altar to be Thine.<sup>11</sup>



There are several points of interest here. Herbert does not illustrate his emblematic poems with woodcut pictures, but he does express his ideas through concrete imagery. Occasionally, as above, the patterned shape of the words upon the page gives the image visual representation. It is interesting also that Herbert does not present the image that meaning may be deduced from it, but rather that it may serve as a focal point for meditation. Miss Rosemary Freeman makes the following observations in her discussion of Herbert which throw light upon our study of the emblematic imagination as a whole:

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Herbert's images remain emblems and at no time encroach upon the wider provinces of the symbol . . . . His method is always to create meaning by creating likenesses; the likenesses are rarely inherent in the imagery chosen nor can they often be seen from the outset. But by the end of the poem the reader always understands and accepts them, for the emblematic image is made wholly convincing as a symbol through the completeness with which the relation is established between it and the idea it embodies.<sup>12</sup>

When we turn to the work of John Bunyan we are at once aware of a vigorous and fertile imagination manipulating the emblematic form in such a way as to serve the allegory as a whole.<sup>13</sup> In The Pilgrim's Progress there is a profusion of striking emblematic passages, many of them recorded in the House of the Interpreter. For example:

Then I saw in my Dream, that the Interpreter took Christian by the Hand, and led him into a Place where was a Fire burning against a Wall, and one standing by it, alwayes casting much Water upon it to quench it; Yet did the Fire burn higher and hotter.

Christian

What means this?



### The Interpreter

This Fire is the Work of Grace that is wrought in the Heart; he that casts Water upon it, to extinguish and put it out, is the Devil; but in that thou seest the Fire notwithstanding burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the reason of that: So he had him about to the backside of the Wall, where he saw a man with a Vessel of Oyl in his hand, of the which he did also continually cast (but secretly) into the Fire.

### Christian

What means this?

### The Interpreter

This is Christ, who continually with the Oyl of his Grace, maintains the Work already begun in the Heart; by the means of which, notwithstanding what the Devil can do, the Souls of his people prove Gracious still. And in that thou sawest, that the Man stood behind the Wall to maintain the Fire; this is to teach thee, that it is hard for the Tempted to see how this work of Grace is maintained in the Soul.<sup>14</sup>

It may be seen from this example that Bunyan stands within the formal emblematic tradition. His symbols are artificial; he frequently makes a point-by-point correspondence between them and their meaning. Yet the material he used was fresh and new with him; his lively imagination created original images such as the fire secretly fed by oil, cited above. Moreover, Bunyan attained a real measure of psychological realism. His personifications are no longer identifiable from their outward appearance (as by the flowing forelock and winged feet in our earliest example), but are to be interpreted according to their behaviour and speech. For example, in this emblem:

. . . the Interpreter took him by the hand, and had him into a little Room, where sat two little Children,





each one in his chair. The name of the eldest was Passion, and the Name of the other Patience. Passion seemed to be much discontented, but Patience was very quiet. Then Christian asked, What is the reason of the Discontent of Passion? The Interpreter answered, the Governour of them would have him stay for his best things, till the beginning of the next year; but he will have all now: But Patience is willing to wait.

Then I saw that one came to Passion, and brought him a bag of Treasure, and poured it down at his feet; the which he took up and rejoiced therein, and withall laughed Patience to scorn: But I beheld but a while, and he had lavished all away, and had nothing left him but Rags.<sup>15</sup>

By the time of Bunyan the technique of emblem-writing had substantially changed in form and content. The early sequence of picture, motto, interpretation and moralization was not generally followed. Subject matter and its treatment had changed also: the abstract and impersonal had become individual and subjective, the conventional creative and imaginative, the decorative literary, the stiffness and artificiality had been supplanted by living, dramatic action.

Finally, let us turn to the writings of Jonathan Swift. One of the most effective of Swift's emblematic pictures is found toward the end of the account of Gulliver's sojourn with the Houyhnhnms. In one unforgettable image, Swift conveys the idea of man's inferiority in the presence of a truly rational creature:

I was forced to wait above an hour for the tide, and then observing the wind very fortunately bearing toward the island to which I intended to steer my course, I took a second leave of my master; but as I was going to prostrate myself to kiss his hoof, he did me the honour to raise it gently to my mouth.<sup>16</sup>





Two short passages from Book III of Gulliver's Travels further illustrate the emblematic quality of Swift's satiric presentation:

My dinner was brought and four persons of quality, whom I remembered to have seen very near the King's person, did me the honour to dine with me. We had two courses of three dishes each. In the first course there was a shoulder of mutton, cut into an equilateral triangle, a piece of beef into a rhomboides, and a pudding into a cycloid. The second course was two ducks, trussed up into the form of fiddles; sausages and puddings resembling flutes and hautboys, and a breast of veal in the shape of a harp. The servants cut our bread into cones, cylinders, parallelograms, and several other mathematical figures.<sup>17</sup>

Gulliver further records his being given a new suit of clothes:

. . . This operator did his office after a different manner from those of his trade in Europe. He first took my altitude by a quadrant, and then with a rule and compasses described the dimensions of my whole body all which he entered upon paper and in six days brought my clothes very ill made and quite out of shape, by happening to mistake a figure in the calculation. But my comfort was, that I observed such accidents very frequent and little regarded.<sup>18</sup>

In each of these examples there is a verbal picture and an implied interpretation to be perceived by the reader. The pictures of the dinner and the tailor's craft are drawn in such a way as to ridicule the absurdities which could be committed in the name of the new science. Swift's method is emblematic in that he expresses the idea of mistaken intellectual endeavor in terms of concrete, specific imagery. Thus Swift used his emblematic imagination freely as he concerned himself with the nature of man and society.

We have considered representative examples of the emblem from the time it was first introduced into England. We have noted the



way in which the emblematic imagination, working freely and creatively can lend excitement and authority to drama, poetry, allegory, and satire. It is clear from the foregoing discussion that the practice of the emblematic art varied greatly as to form, content, purpose, effectiveness and imaginative quality. Yet, it seems to me, that the essence of emblematic writing remained unchanged and that it may be defined in terms of the two principles stated below:

First, the basic, double approach to meaning is always present.

There is the approach through the senses by means of a picture which is to be regarded figuratively, and which may be actual or verbal, real or imaginary. There is the approach through the intellect by interpretation, discussion, exhortation or implication.

Secondly, the image is always consciously equated with its significance or meaning, yet image and meaning are not so merged or fused that either loses its separate identity. As we shall see in Chapter II, this principle is an important one for it enables us to distinguish between emblematic symbols and certain other symbols which also appear in Moby Dick.

These two propositions, taken together, define the essence of emblematic writing for the purposes of this essay. These are the two principles which will guide us as we consider the question of how Melville's emblematic imagination found expression in Moby Dick.



## CHAPTER II

### THE EMBLEM AND THE SYMBOL

When we attempt to apply the principles of definition arrived at in Chapter I to the symbolism in Moby Dick, we find that it is not a simple matter to separate the emblematic from other types of symbolism. An emblem is one answer to the problem of how to give concrete expression to universal meanings and abstract ideas. It is a device which can bridge the apparent gulf between the general and the particular, outer circumstance and inner reality, sense and intellect. It moves toward its solution through the establishment of a resemblance between image and meaning. But these general observations concerning the emblem are also true of many symbols found in Moby Dick, symbols to which the emblematic principles are only partially applicable. In this chapter I shall discuss these "other" symbols, pointing out why they are excluded from this study on the basis of our stated principles.

Our discussion will be simplified if we first consider the types of resemblance which can be established between an image and its meaning. As we have already seen, the image chosen as an emblematic symbol bears an extrinsic, artificial resemblance to the meaning it is meant to convey. As a further illustration of this kind of resemblance, let us consider an emblem from Moby Dick itself. The "peeled white body of the beheaded whale" has been cut loose





from the side of the ship. Melville paints this picture:

There's a most doleful and most mocking funeral! The sea-vultures all in pious mourning, the air-sharks all punctiliously in black or speckled. In life but few of them would have helped the whale, I ween, if per-adventure he had needed it; but upon the banquet of his funeral they most piously do pounce. Oh, horrible vultureism [sic] of earth! from which not the mightiest whale is free.

Nor is this the end. Desecrated as the body is, a vengeful ghost survives and hovers over it to scare. Espied by some timid man-of-war or blundering discovery-vessel from afar, when the distance obscuring the swarming fowls, nevertheless still shows the white mass floating in the sun, and the white spray heaving high against it; straightway the whale's unharmed corpse, with trembling fingers is set down in the log - shoals, rocks, and breakers hereabouts: beware! And for years afterwards, perhaps, ships shun the place; leaping over it as silly sheep leap over a vacuum, because their leader originally leaped there when a stick was held.

Melville's interpretative comment follows:

There's your law of precedents; there's your utility of traditions; there's the story of your obstinate survival of old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even hovering in the air! There's orthodoxy!

Thus, while in life the great whale's body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world.

Are you a believer in ghosts, my friend?<sup>19</sup>

This passage illustrates how an emblem links unlike images and ideas on the level of conscious thought. A dead, floating whale does not inherently, of itself, suggest orthodoxy of belief. It is only when the writer links the image forcibly and arbitrarily to the idea that the reader intellectually grasps the relationship.

We find in Moby Dick another type of symbol which I would describe as Analogical, for its perception depends upon the



existence of a similarity of pattern between image and meaning. The resemblance between image and meaning is intrinsic and natural. Such a symbol seeks to build up the already known and to extend it, to universalize it. To put it in another way, the potential meaning is germinal within the image itself. A number of the major symbols in Moby Dick fall into this classification. To cite examples, the voyage on a whaling ship readily presents itself to the imagination as parallel to a voyage of the mind or soul; the search through the awesome natural world is easily translated into man's search for meaning in a hostile or indifferent universe; the ship, pictured as the world in miniature, by analogy becomes the known world of experience. Thus far these symbols could be termed emblematic, for the analogy can readily be perceived by the intellect. But these analogical symbols in Moby Dick go further; they constantly go beyond the established resemblance between image and meaning to summon up thoughts and feelings other than those to which they give explicit expression. Though the "eye of understanding" is able to perceive their significance up to a point, beyond that point the meaning and the image become so fused and identified with each other that there seems to be a mysterious, irrational connection between them. In the words of William Ellery Sedgwick:

. . . No statement as to their meaning can convey how vital, how meaningful these symbols are . . . they are interrelated . . . Yet within their



interrelationship, they enjoy unlimited freedom of association. They are continually taking up new positions by themselves and toward one another and opening new vistas into the mystery of things . . . the mind sees its own image in all things, a process without beginning, middle or end.<sup>20</sup>

Analogical symbols, then, subject as they are to multiple interpretation, are excluded from our study by the second of our two principles of definition, that is, that image and meaning shall be equated, not fused or identified with one another, each maintaining its own identity and outline. In the analogical symbol the image and meaning are partially equated, but they also become fused and identified to the point where they are indistinguishable one from the other.

The second type of symbol which is excluded by definition from this study is the Archetypal symbol. The reason for this exclusion will be made clear if we first consider the manner in which a symbol is grasped by the reader. The emblematic symbol is consciously grasped as its meaning is apprehended by the intellect. The archetypal symbol, rising from the sub-conscious mind, is rather felt or experienced; it is grasped intuitively. In Moby Dick we find archetypal symbols such as the sea, fire, the vulturism of the sharks, whiteness, to some extent the Whale itself. An element of power in the narrative is also attributable to archetypal images such as the coffin, the harpoons, the squid, Ahab's deformity. In the evocative chapter, "The Whiteness of the Whale", Melville indicated the nature of the archetypal symbol when he wrote:





. . .symbolize whatever grand or gracious thing he will by whiteness, no man can deny that in its profoundest idealized significance it calls up a peculiar apparition to the soul. But though without dissent this point be fixed, how is mortal man to account for it? To analyse it, would seem impossible. Can we, then, by the citation of some of those instances wherein this thing of whiteness - though for the time either wholly or in great part stripped of all direct associations calculated to impart to it aught fearful, but nevertheless, is found to exert over us the same sorcery, however modified; - can we thus hope to light upon some chance clue to conduct us to the hidden cause we seek?

Let us try. But in a matter like this, subtlety appeals to subtlety, and without imagination no man can follow another into these halls. And though, doubtless, some at least of the imaginative impressions about to be presented may have been shared by most men, yet few perhaps were entirely conscious of them at the time, and therefore may not be able to recall them now.<sup>21</sup>

It seems clear that the archetypal symbol fails to conform to either of our principles of definition. Only the sense side of the double approach to meaning is present, and that in an indeterminate way. The intellectual half of the equation is missing. Indeed, it might be argued that once an archetypal image or symbol is perceived intellectually, it ceases to be archetype. I think, however, that in Moby Dick, the archetypal symbols are partially emblematic, in that the "eye of understanding" is able to attach tentative meanings to them. But there is danger in applying the eye of reason to an indeterminate symbol. Consider this passage from Tindall's The Literary Symbol, with respect to possible interpretations of the Whale:



During the course of Studies in Classic American Literature, D. H. Lawrence comes to Moby Dick: "Of course he is a symbol. Of what? I doubt if even Melville knew exactly. That's the best of it." Later on, however, reproving Melville for a transcendentalism unlike his own, and refusing to accept the story as "a voyage of the soul", Lawrence prefers to take it literally as a "sea yarn". That is a good beginning: the whale is a whale - but he also seems more than a whale, and Lawrence, unable to resist, leaves the literal story he has been enjoying for a definite interpretation in the light of his philosophy: "What then is Moby Dick? - he is the deepest blood-being of the white race . . . And he is hunted . . . by the maniacal fanaticism of our white mental consciousness." If we contemplate the image of the whale we must admit that it embodies sexual suggestions. That it presents the phallic being endangered by the mind is possible, but it seems illiberal to exclude possibilities which are as plainly embodied. Each of us, carrying his own baggage to the symbol, admires what he has brought without care for what the pile obscures. The symbol seems to invite this undertaking; and our excuse must be that we find it hard to endure the indefinite.

The medieval bestiary includes the whale. In the first part of the verses devoted to that "fish" he is described, and in the second his significance is defined. This emblematic habit of mind, persisting to our day, limits or disembodies Moby Dick, who, becoming a mirror for critics, "represents" or "signifies" their anthropological, political, sociological or psychological concerns.<sup>22</sup>

The reader of emblems need not "endure the indefinite", for the meaning of an emblem is not in doubt or open to subjective interpretation or speculation. The author knows what he wishes to say, the reader's wit is exercised in discovering what it is, in equating and correlating the meaning with the visual presentation.

It can be said then, that both archetypal and analogical symbols are outside the limits set by our principles of definition; the archetypal is excluded by both propositions, the analogical by the



second. At the same time it should be recognized that both archetypal and analogical symbols in Moby Dick are partially susceptible to emblematic interpretation. Unlike emblematic symbols, however, they remain indeterminate and indefinite in their total meaning and impact, the archetypal because of its sublogical origins, the analogical because of its supralogical intent. Our examination of Melville's emblematic art in Chapter Four will be guided by the principles of definition formulated in Chapter One, with analogical and archetypal symbols being excluded from the discussion for the reasons indicated above.





### CHAPTER III

#### THE AWAKENING OF THE EMBLEMATIC IMAGINATION

Before the appearance of Moby Dick in 1851, Melville had written five novels. In 1846 and 1847 he had published Typee and its sequel Omoo, both relating adventures in the South Seas. In the autumn of 1849 came Redburn, based largely on Melville's experience as a merchant seaman. These early works are adventure narratives written on the level of simple realism. However, in the spring of 1849, between Omoo and Redburn, Melville had written Mardi which seemed to be feeling its way toward a deeper level of reality. Mardi is a bewilderingly complex work. It begins in the familiar, realistic, adventure style, then suddenly branches into two new, major themes. There is the "Mardi-myth" which works itself out in the epic-tragic theme of Taji in search of Yillah, doubly pursued by bearers of vengeance and by the heralds of Hautia. There is the "Mardi-satire" in which Melville parallels Taji's search for Yillah with an exhaustive search for the one true philosophy. Melville's imagination must have been impelled in both directions at once, for these two themes never really seem comfortable together. In this first attempt to pass beyond simple narrative, Melville used all the wrong tools. He had yet to find a vehicle adequate for the expression of his experience and insight. Nevertheless, Mardi is interesting because in it Melville's imagination was beginning to work in a new way



which foreshadowed the emblematic and symbolic art which was to come:

First, in Mardi the realistic travel voyage is replaced by the "philosophic voyage". The earlier adventure-type story is succeeded by a voyage of the human mind in quest of truth. Taji visits a series of allegorically independent islands, each representing a different approach to life and a different set of values. In addition, he pursues a personal goal represented by the maid Yillah. The two searches reflect Melville's most recent discoveries at the time of writing: his own inner self, and the social and intellectual world around him.

Secondly, in Mardi the intellectual side is expressed forcibly for the first time, the technique being to sift each new experience through four different mentalities and temperaments: poet, historian, philosopher and king. In this respect Mardi swings almost to the opposite extreme from the early novels which were based primarily on what Melville had apprehended through his senses. In Chapter I we noted that in emblematic writing sense and intellect should be in approximate balance. In Mardi the intellectual interest is dominant. It was not until Moby Dick that a satisfying balance between sense and intellect was to be realized.

Finally, Mardi embodies an experiment in technique. Confronted by the problem of how to correlate two levels of being, the ideal and the actual, Melville attempted allegory. In Mardi



Melville experimented for the first time with the emblematic technique of compressing general conceptions into specific images. That the result is often tedious, over-elaborate, wooden and artificial, no one would deny. Yet Mardi is significant because it reveals how Melville was striving to discover the new technique that his deepening experience and growing philosophic interests demanded. In this work which is at once exciting and exasperating, there is foreshadowing of the later, more mature form his expression was to take.

A further step toward maturity is evident in White Jacket which appeared in 1850, the year before Moby Dick was published. White Jacket is based upon Melville's first-hand experience of the brutality of life aboard a naval man-of-war. It resembles the realistic, concrete narratives of Melville's early period, yet there are significant developments. As there had been in Redburn, there is in White Jacket a growing tragic vision and as a result a new expression of humanitarian and social purpose. Moreover, as the sub-title "The World in a Man-of-War" indicates, Melville's "eye of understanding" was beginning to discern emblematic meanings. In the words of Leon Howard:

His new perceptions of what he was later to call the broad "significance" of particular objects or incidents made his man-of-war a better representation of the world than his Mardian archipelago had been. For in Mardi he had dealt in ideas which he had brought to a focus in symbols, whereas in White Jacket he began to make his particulars so suggestive that they appear emblematic.<sup>23</sup>





Let us consider a number of examples which illustrate the emblematic quality to which Howard refers. In mentioning the significance of the man-of-war, Melville writes:

A man-of-war's-man is only a man-of-war's-man at sea; and the sea is the place to learn what he is. But we have seen that a man-of-war is but this old-fashioned world of ours afloat, full of all manner of characters - full of strange contradictions; and though boasting some fine fellows here and there, yet upon the whole, charged to the combings of her hatchways with the spirit of Belial and all unrighteousness.<sup>24</sup>

Again, in the concluding chapter:

As a man-of-war that sails through the sea, so this earth that sails through the air. We mortals are all on board a fast-sailing, never-sinking world-frigate, of which God was the shipwright; and she is but one craft in a Milky-Way fleet, of which God is the Lord High Admiral. The port we sail from is forever astern. And though far out of sight of land, for ages and ages we continue to sail with sealed orders, and our last destination remains a secret to ourselves and our officers; yet our final haven was predestinated ere we slipped from the stocks at creation.<sup>25</sup>

There is emblematic significance, also, in the image of the white jacket itself which becomes a symbol of bad luck and isolation, and in the end nearly causes White Jacket's death. It is described as " . . . a strange-looking coat, to be sure; of a Quakerish amplitude about the skirts; with an infirm, tumbledown collar; and a clumsy fullness about the wristbands; and white, yea, white as a shroud."<sup>26</sup> When it fails to find a purchaser at an auction sale aboard the snip, White Jacket comments:

. . . there was no getting rid of it, except by rolling a forty-two-pound shot in it and committing it to the deep. But though, in my desperation, I had once contemplated something of the sort, yet I had now



become accountably averse to it, from certain involuntary superstitious considerations. If I sink my jacket, thought I, it will sure spread itself into a bed at the bottom of the sea, upon which I shall sooner or later recline, a dead man. So, unable to conjure it into the possession of another, and withheld from burying it out of sight forever, my jacket stuck to me like the fatal shirt on Nessus.<sup>27</sup>

In one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, *White Jacket* is finally free of his burden. He has risen to the surface after falling from the yard-arm and finds his swimming impeded by the jacket:

I strove to tear it off . . . I whipped out my knife, that was tucked at my belt, and ripped my jacket straight up and down, as if I were ripping myself open. With a violent struggle I then burst out of it, and was free. Heavily soaked, it slowly sank before my eyes.

Sink! sink! oh shroud! thought I; sink forever! accursed jacket that thou art!

See that white shark!

The next instant that barbed bunch of harpoons pierced through and through the unfortunate jacket, and swiftly sped down with it out of sight.<sup>28</sup>

Passages such as these bear out Howard's assertion that in White Jacket Melville began to make his details so suggestive that they appear emblematic. It is interesting to note that in these passages emblematic significance is given to three images which become symbols of a different kind in Moby Dick: the ship as the world in miniature, the voyage as the life of every man, and whiteness as connoting apprehension and fear. One additional example is of interest in that Melville employs the word "emblematical" in it, in designating the relation between an image and its meaning. He is describing the firing of a gun salute on the occasion of the death of a naval official:



. . . I thought it a strange mode of honouring a man's memory who had himself been slaughtered by a cannon. Only the smoke, that, after rolling in at the portholes, rapidly drifted away to leeward, and was lost to view, seemed truly emblematical touching the personage thus honoured, since that great non-combatant, the Bible, assures us that our life is but a vapour, that quickly passeth away.<sup>29</sup>

There is in White Jacket one other quality of writing which anticipates Moby Dick. I refer to a new immediacy, best illustrated by a further quotation from the chapter "The Last of the Jacket". White Jacket has fallen from the yard-arm with near fatal results:

For one instant an agonizing revulsion came over me as I found myself utterly sinking. Next moment the force of my fall was expended; and there I hung, vibrating in the mid-deep. What wild sounds then rang in my ear! One was a soft moaning, as of low waves on the beach; the other wild and heartlessly jubilant, as of the sea in the height of a tempest. Oh soul! thou then heardest life and death; as he who stands upon the Corinthian shore hears both the Ionian and the Aegean waves. The life-and-death poise soon passed; and then I found myself slowly ascending, and caught a dim glimmering of light.<sup>30</sup>

In this passage, and throughout the entire chapter, Melville not only gives an authentic record of details, but more important, he is able to convey the nature of White Jacket's feelings at the very moment those feelings were being experienced. Here is evidence of Melville's growing skill in simultaneously expressing the inner and outer life, the life of the mind and the body, a skill which also gives distinction and power to a number of emblems found in Moby Dick.

In White Jacket, then, there are two developments which hold





particular interest for us: the perception of emblematic meaning in objects and events, and the growing skill in portraying the immediate moment of a given experience. Melville's struggle with the problems of the nature and destiny of man, the nature of the universe, of evil and of suffering, was yet to come, yet in both Mardi and White Jacket his imagination was already reaching out to embrace these deeper concerns. He now required a new mode of expression, so that in Mardi and White Jacket we find Melville for the first time experimenting with symbolic and emblematic techniques.

As Melville pondered those "deeper concerns" referred to above, he must have been greatly influenced by Transcendentalism, the ascendant philosophy of his time and an integral part of his environment. Indeed, Moby Dick cannot be properly understood without a knowledge of what Transcendentalists were saying about Nature, God and Man. As we shall see from internal evidence in Moby Dick, Transcendentalism had played a major role in the development of Melville's thought and had provided terms of reference for his awakening imaginative power.

Transcendentalism asserted that the real world is the world of the spirit, and that the natural world is a manifestation of the rather nebulous "Divine" which is the heart of the universe. It was believed that the Divine manifested itself in all of the universe, in its totality, and individually in every separate



thing. On the basis of this idea the Doctrine of Correspondences was established: that every natural fact corresponds to some spiritual fact whose symbol it is, and that each natural fact therefore mirrors and manifests the divine within itself. Likewise, each individual man, as a separate manifestation, is good in his essential nature. His intuition and impulses will carry the divine authority and be expressive of it, if he is left to himself and not subjected to external authority and pressure. Drawing upon his own resources, man can extricate himself from his problems and dilemmas. Let him be shown what is good and he will adopt it for his own. This outlook required the Transcendentalists to take a privative view of evil and suffering which appear cruelly unjust to man only because of his partial knowledge and his incomplete understanding. If he were capable of grasping the meaning of the totality of the universe, he would see that seeming evil is really a part of the larger good.

To what extent was Melville influenced by Transcendentalism? His early experiences, which had inclined him to think about cruelty and suffering, as is evident in Redburn and White Jacket, had turned his mind toward a tragic view of life. He had rejected all positive and optimistic interpretations of the universe in Mardi, where the search for a true philosophy had ended in a void. The gulf between the ideal and the actual had been constantly widening for Melville, and he was increasingly troubled by the problem of evil. He would



have agreed that some spiritual reality was at the core of the universe. But he was not convinced that the spiritual reality corresponded to the Divine of the Transcendentalists, or that it was characterized by the attributes of beauty, truth and goodness. In Melville's own words: "Though in many of its aspects this visible world seems formed in love, the invisible spheres were formed in fright."<sup>31</sup> He would have accepted the idea of Correspondences for it was on this basis that he could observe: "O Nature, and O soul of man! how far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! not the smallest atom stirs or lives on matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind,"<sup>32</sup> or ". . . some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher . . . ." <sup>33</sup> Melville was anything but sure that this significance was wholly beneficent. What about the demonic? "Not ignoring what is good, I am quick to perceive a horror . . . ." <sup>34</sup> he declares in the first chapter; and later, as he contemplates the activities of the vultures and sharks, he exclaims: "Oh, horrible vultureism [sic] of earth!" <sup>35</sup>

Thus, while accepting the Transcendentalist framework, Melville questioned the content. Ahab's impassioned speech to Starbuck is important here:

Hark ye yet again, - the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event - in the living act, the undoubted deed - there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it.





That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate;  
and be the white whale agent, or be the white  
whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon  
him.<sup>36</sup>

Melville's response to Transcendentalism affected his emblematic writing in both a positive and a negative way: positive as to technique, negative as to meaning. In Moby Dick, Melville used the transcendentalist technique, the essence of which is exploration. He moved, as did the Transcendentalists, from objective fact toward spiritual truth. The fact that, for Melville the exploration resulted not in an intellectual or spiritual certainty but in a disquieting question mark, placed him at variance with the Transcendentalists of his day.

It is interesting to note that when Melville employed the transcendentalist technique, he reversed the procedure which had been followed by traditional emblem-writers. The early emblem-writers had worked from an accepted, systematized view of the universe inherited from the Middle Ages. Theirs was a form of expression based on ingrained conviction. Such writers apprehended spiritual realities first, then translated them into concrete symbols. But Melville, working from no fixed belief, seized upon the concrete symbols first, then relied on the resources of his imagination to force his way through to an understanding of some significance beyond. It is not surprising, then, that Melville's emblems frequently express uncertainty, doubt, even defiance, instead of the accepted moral and spiritual truths presented by the emblem-writers.



It was a great emblematic writer who stimulated Melville's mind and imagination more profoundly than anyone else. Nathaniel Hawthorne, his roots firmly planted in New England Puritanism, wrote from within the same kind of framework as the early emblem-writers had, that is, from a systematized view of the universe and an accepted code of moral and spiritual values. It is probably no exaggeration to state, with respect to Hawthorne's impact upon Melville, that the powerful intellectual and imaginative energy characteristic of Moby Dick would not have been released in the same way, had Hawthorne's influence been withheld.

In the summer of 1850, Melville's publisher, Evert Duyckinck, wrote: "Melville has a new book mostly done - a romantic, fanciful & literal & most enjoyable presentment of the whale fishery - something quite new."<sup>37</sup> Melville was reading Hawthorne's Mosses from an Old Manse at the time, preparatory to writing an essay upon it for publication in the Literary World. In that essay Melville proclaimed his great enthusiasm for Hawthorne; he advanced the belief that a man of Hawthorne's calibre could, through the medium of narrative prose, approach Shakespeare in intellectual excellence. Leon Howard observes:

. . . it [the essay] was a confession that the author of Mosses from an Old Manse possessed some extraordinary power of appeal to him at that special time . . . . In the concluding section of the essay he wrote . . . 'To what infinite height of loving



wonder and admiration I may yet be borne, when  
by repeatedly banqueting on these Mosses I  
shall have thoroughly incorporated their whole  
stuff into my being, - that I cannot tell.  
But already I feel that this Hawthorne has  
dropped germinous seeds into my soul!<sup>38</sup>

The same summer Melville met Hawthorne in person and there followed a year of visiting and discussion during which Moby Dick was rewritten. Hawthorne and Melville had much in common: they shared a realization of the ambiguity of appearances and reality; they alike rejected the Transcendentalists' optimistic and over-simplified view of the nature of man; they were concerned with how best the imagination might mediate between matter and spirit. Melville, with "the problem of the universe revolving within him", and with an inchoate philosophy struggling for expression, was ready for Hawthorne's touch. He responded strongly to stories such as Earth's Holocaust with its message that man is not innately good but may have the sources of the world's evil within his own nature; and to Young Goodman Brown, in which goodness is depicted as a disguise for Satanism, and which ends with the young man's allegorical cry for Faith. Under such influence, Melville became feverishly excited: he felt that at last he was "probing the axis of reality", and not the false appearances which had deceived him for so long. He found attitudes and ideas which had been smouldering within him for years, brought to focus and given profound expression in Hawthorne's work. Here was a fellow artist who understood the complexity of





existence and the blackness which pervaded the universe. The balance which he found in Hawthorne between the "great heart and the grand intellect", between matter and spirit as expressed in such stories as Rappaccini's Daughter, The Virtuoso's Collection and The Hall of Fantasy, excited his imagination.

Stimulated by a new approach to human nature which more nearly satisfied his increasingly tragic view of life, and by a new conception of the power of evil and blackness, Melville began to re-work Moby Dick in such a way as to give forceful expression to his philosophical ideas. At this point, Hawthorne made an even greater contribution to Melville, for he provided him with the emblematic impetus that he required. In Hawthorne, particularly in The Scarlet Letter, Melville saw how emblematic writing could be utilized for the exploration and projection of inner and outer conflict which is essential to authentic characterization and dramatic narration. In The Scarlet Letter, each image is invested with an unmistakable emblematic significance. Moreover, these emblematic images are grouped in such a way as to create sharp antagonisms, and to mark the lines of conflict within the narrative action. The images of the rose, the forest, the sunshine and the brook are emblematic of Nature and natural freedom; the scaffold and the prison are emblematic of the Puritan community; the



scarlet letter and the breast-plate of governance are emblematic of law and authority, the one of the church, the other of the community. The nature images are consistently set over against the others and the stage is set for the conflict between various aspects of law versus natural freedom.

So it was that at a most propitious time, Melville was exposed to the influence of a thoroughly emblematic novel, emblematic in detail, in characterization and in total meaning. With new ideas clamoring for expression, and a recognition of the power of emblematic writing, Melville transformed his romantic, literal, narrative tale of the whale fishery into a searching, highly symbolic work. That the essential imaginative quality of Moby Dick was so significantly altered, is directly traceable to Melville's providential encounter with Hawthorne, man and writer.<sup>39</sup>



## CHAPTER IV

### MELVILLE'S EMBLEMS

Melville's emblematic imagination may be seen at work in Moby Dick from the very beginning. The first chapter contains a "scattered" or "cumulative" emblem, that is, an emblem which is complete although it does not exist in an independent passage which can be extracted from the whole. By using this emblem Melville indicates at the outset the symbolic significance which the sea is to have throughout the entire novel. The picture is of water and its irresistible fascination for man. Gathering the relevant sentences together, we have the following:

Posted like silent sentinels all around the town,  
stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed  
in ocean reveries.

But look! here come more crowds, pacing straight  
for the water . . . they must get just as nigh the  
water as they possibly can without falling in.

Yes, as every one knows, meditation and water are  
wedded for ever.

But here is an artist. He desires to paint you the  
dreamiest, shadiest, quietest, most enchanting bit  
of romantic landscape . . . But though the picture  
lies thus tranced, and though this pine-tree shakes  
down its sighs like leaves upon this shepherd's  
head, yet all were vain, unless the shepherd's eye  
were fixed upon the magic stream before him.

Go visit the Prairies in June, when for scores on  
scores of miles you wade knee-deep among Tiger-lilies -





what is the one charm wanting? - Water - there is not a drop of water there! Were Niagara but a cataract of sand, would you travel your thousand miles to see it? Why did the poor poet of Tennessee, upon suddenly receiving two handfuls of silver, deliberate whether to buy him a coat, which he sadly needed, or invest his money in a pedestrian trip to Rockaway Beach? Why is almost every robust healthy boy with a robust healthy soul in him, at some time or other crazy to go to sea? Why upon your first voyage as a passenger, did you yourself feel such a mystical vibration, when first told that you and your ship were now out of sight of land? Why did the old Persians hold the sea holy? Why did the Greeks give it a separate deity, and own brother of Jove?

The interpretative passage follows:

Surely all this is not without meaning. And still deeper the meaning of that story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. But that same image we ourselves see in all rivers and oceans. It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life; and this is the key to it all.<sup>40</sup>

The picture here is comprised of pictorial detail, illustration, impression and argument. In common with early emblem-writers, Melville used classical references to enrich the interpretation. By indicating that it is the "ungraspable phantom of life" which he seeks, and by suggesting that any attempt to pursue the "tormenting, mild image" may end in destruction, Melville set the stage for the ensuing drama.

The fact that the struggle to wrest the final answer from Nature takes place on a whaling ship, the life of which is faithfully recorded in all its brutality, lends a burning authenticity



to the events of the symbolic voyage. Melville, while picturing the daily activities aboard the whaler, and the dramatic events of the whaling voyage, was at the same time exercising his "eye of understanding" and perceiving emblematic meaning everywhere. For example, he has given a detailed description of the nature and function of the whale lines which are attached to the pursuit boats, and of the danger they represent. Then:

. . . the graceful repose of the line, as it silently serpentines about the oarsmen before being brought into actual play - this is a thing which carries more of true terror than any other aspect of this dangerous affair.

Melville adds reflectively:

But why say more? All men live enveloped in whale lines. All are born with halters round their necks; but it is only when caught in the swift, sudden turn of death, that mortals realize the silent, subtle, ever-present perils of life. And if you be a philosopher, though seated in the whaleboat, you would not at heart feel one whit more of terror, than though seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon by your side.<sup>41</sup>

A dramatic example is found in the account of the first of many "lowerings" of the whaleboats for the chase. Flask has complained that he cannot see enough from his position in the boat. Daggoo,

with one dexterous fling landed the little man high and dry on his shoulders. And here was Flask now standing, Daggoo with one lifted arm furnishing him with a breastband to lean against and steady himself



by. . . . for sustaining himself with a cool, indifferent, easy unthought of, barbaric majesty, the noble negro to every roll of the sea harmoniously rolled his fine form. On his broad back, flaxen-haired Flask seemed a snow-flake . . . . Though truly vivacious, tumultuous, ostentatious little Flask would now and then stamp with impatience; but not one added heave did he thereby give to the negro's lordly chest.

Having painted this word picture, Melville interprets:

So have I seen Passion and Vanity stamping the living, magnanimous earth, but the earth did not alter her tides and her seasons for that.<sup>42</sup>

These latter two examples illustrate the way in which Melville's emblematic imagination frequently worked. The picture rises naturally from the main narrative, sometimes quietly and unobtrusively, more often vividly, dramatically, with an emphasis on action. Of added interest in the second example is the "still" picture of the little man upon the lordly Negro's shoulders, and the personifications reminiscent of the early emblematic style.

Thus the events of the chase are consistently charged with emblematic meaning. When a whale has been pursued and captured, it is hoisted by the ship's side<sup>43</sup>, beheaded<sup>44</sup>, and stripped of its blubber.<sup>45</sup> For this last-mentioned duty Queequeg, who had descended to the whale's back and was required to remain there during the whole of the stripping operation, was supported only by a "monkey-rope" fastened round his waist, the other end secured to Ishmael, standing on the ship's side. Melville describes





the scene further:

. . . besides the monkey-rope, with which I now and then jerked the poor fellow from too close a vicinity to the maw of what seemed a peculiarly ferocious shark - he was provided with still another protection. Suspended over the side in one of the stages, Tashtego and Daggoo continually flourished over his head a couple of keen whale-spades, wherewith they slaughtered as many sharks as they could reach. This procedure of theirs to be sure, was very disinterested and benevolent of them. They meant Queequeg's best happiness, I admit; but in their hasty zeal to befriend him, and from the circumstances that both he and the sharks were at times half hidden by the blood-muddled water, those indiscreet spades of theirs would come nearer amputating a leg than a tail.

In his interpretative comment, Melville gives the reader a sense of participating with Ishmael as he experienced the moment of perception:

Well, well, my dear comrade and twin-brother, thought I, as I drew in and then slacked off the rope to every swell of the sea - what matters it, after all? Are you not the precious image of each and all of us men in this whaling world? That unsounded ocean you gasp in, is Life; those sharks, your foes; those spades, your friends; and what between sharks and spades, you are in a sad pickle and peril, poor lad.<sup>46</sup>

Thus with a touch of sardonic humor, Melville used the emblem to speak on a recurring theme: the hostility of the universe and the perilous nature of human existence.

Once the stripping operation is finished and the carcass set adrift<sup>47</sup>, the ship is speedily prepared for the trying out of the blubber. This occasion provides an illustration of Melville's ability to pitch the emblem in a highly dramatic key, both in the presented scene and the reflective passage attached to it. He



records the scene vividly:

. . . as the wind howled on, and the sea leaped, and the ship groaned and dived, and yet steadfastly shot her red hell further and further into the blackness of the sea and the night, and scornfully champed the white bone in her mouth, and viciously spat round her on all sides; then the rushing Pequod, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul.

With this emblematic thought uppermost in his mind, Ishmael continues his midnight watch, when

. . . a strange (and ever since inexplicable) thing occurred to me. Starting from a brief standing sleep, I was horribly conscious of something fatally wrong. . . . Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern. A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me. Convulsively my hands grasped the tiller, but with the crazy conceit that the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted. My God! what is the matter with me? thought I. Lo! in my brief sleep I had turned myself about, and was fronting the ship's stern, with my back to her prow and the compass. In an instant I faced back, just in time to prevent the vessel from flying up into the wind, and very probably capsizing her.

From the intense excitement of this scene, Melville moves on to the reflective part of the emblematic expression, which in this case takes the form of a passionate exhortation. It is noteworthy, that in this exhortation and meditation, Melville expresses a cautious optimism concerning ultimate reality while at the same time he recognizes the sorrow and blackness which are integral to life:



Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! . . . believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. Tomorrow in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames the morn will show in far other, at least, gentler relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp - all others but liars!

Nevertheless the sun hides not Virginia's Dismal Swamp, nor Rome's accursed Campagna, nor wide Sahara, nor all the millions of miles of deserts and of griefs beneath the moon. The sun hides not the ocean, which is the dark side of this earth, and which is two thirds of this earth. So, therefore, that mortal man who hath more of joy than sorrow in him, that mortal man cannot be true. . . . The truest of all men was the Man of Sorrows, and the truest of all books is Solomon's and Ecclesiastes is the fine hammered steel of woe. "All is vanity." ALL. This wilful world hath not got hold of unchristian Solomon's wisdom yet. But he who dodges hospitals and jails, and walks fast crossing grave-yards, and would rather talk of operas than hell; calls Cowper, Young, Pascal, Rousseau, poor devils all of sick men; and throughout a carefree lifetime swears by Rabelais as passing wise and therefore jolly; - not that man is fitted to sit down on tomb-stones and break the green damp mould with unfathomably wondrous Solomon.

But even Solomon, he says, "the man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain . . . in the congregation of the dead." Give not thyself up, then, to fire, lest it invert thee, deaden thee; as for the time it did me. There is a wisdom that is woe; but there is a woe that is madness. And there is a Catskill eagle in some souls that can alike dive down into the blackest gorges, and soar out of them again and become invisible in the sunny spaces. And even if he forever flies within the gorge, that gorge is in the mountains; so that even in his lowest swoop the mountain eagle is still higher than other birds upon the plain, even though they soar.<sup>48</sup>

This whole passage contains writing of tremendous vitality, freshness and power. The picture, rising naturally out of the







narrative action, is convincingly real and gripping in its intensity. The interpretation is, in effect, an eloquent sermon on the text, "Give not thyself up to fire". The exhortation is characterized by the use of Biblical reference, literary allusions, moral observations and natural analogy, all culminating in a most effective metaphor, that of the Catskill eagle.

With the strenuous trying-out process completed, it is time for cleaning up. Melville comments on the killing pace which the sailors are called upon to maintain:

. . . many is the time, when, after the severest uninterrupted labors, which know no night; continuing straight through for ninety-six hours; when from the boat, where they have swelled their wrists with all day rowing on the Line, - they only step to the deck to carry vast chains, and heave the heavy windlass, and cut and slash, yea, and in their very sweatings to be smoked and burned anew by the combined fires of the equatorial sun and the equatorial try-works; when on the heel of all this, they have finally bestirred themselves to cleanse the ship, and make a spotless dairy room of it; many is the time the poor fellows, just buttoning the necks of their clean frocks, are startled by the cry of "There she blows!" and away they fly to fight another whale and go through the whole weary thing again.

Melville makes this application:

Oh! my friends, but this is man-killing! Yet this is life. For hardly have we mortals by long toilings extracted from the world's vast bulk its small but valuable sperm; and then, with weary patience, cleansed ourselves from its defilements, and learned to live here in clean tabernacles of the soul; hardly is this done, when - There she blows! - the ghost is spouted up, and away we sail to fight some other world, and go through young life's old routine again.<sup>49</sup>

In another pictorial emblem, Melville draws this impression of a whale swimming serenely within sight of the ship:



. . . how nobly it raises our conceit of the mighty, misty monster, to behold him solemnly sailing through a calm tropical sea; his vast, mild head overhung by a canopy of vapor, engendered by his incommunicable contemplations, and that vapor as you will sometimes see it - glorified by a rainbow, as if Heaven itself had put its seal upon his thoughts.

To this picture, Melville attaches a meaning which illuminates his own thought processes:

For, d'ye see, rainbows do not visit the clear air; they only irradiate vapor. And so, through all the thick mists of the dim doubts in my mind, divine intuitions now and then shoot, enkindling my fog with a heavenly ray. And for this I thank God; for all have doubts; many deny; but doubts or denials, few along with them, have intuitions. Doubts of all things earthly, and intuitions of some things heavenly; this combination makes neither believer nor infidel, but makes a man who regards them both with equal eye.<sup>50</sup>

Melville's emblematic imagination frequently created pictures of a rather unusual kind. As we have seen from the examples cited, the emblematic picture might be presented in the form of a dramatic scene, a still picture verbally described, or an informative passage developed by the use of pictorial detail, simile or analogy. Two further examples provide interesting variants. The first illustrates how Melville's approach to sense in his emblematic pictures was not confined to the visual but included touch and smell. He is describing the process of squeezing the lumps out of the cooled spermaceti. This emblem is related in the first person by Ishmael, and is not subject to the customary division into picture and interpretation, for the two aspects of sense and intellect are inseparable, held together by the act of perception itself. What



could easily have remained a static conception, becomes a present, immediate moment for the reader. Examples of this type pass far beyond the scope of the woodcut emblem and represent a significant extension of the emblematic art.

It [the spermaceti] had cooled and crystallized to such a degree, that when with several others, I sat down before a large Constantine's bath of it, I found it strangely concreted into lumps, here and there rolling about in the liquid part. It was our business to squeeze these lumps back into the fluid. A sweet and unctuous duty! No wonder that in old times this sperm was such a favorite cosmetic. Such a clearer! Such a sweetener! Such a softener! Such a delicious mollifier! After having my hands in it for only a few minutes, my fingers felt like eels, and began, as it were, to serpentine and spiralize.

. . . as I snuffed up that uncontaminated aroma, - literally and truly, like the smell of spring violets; I declare to you, that for the time I lived as in a musky meadow; I forgot all about our horrible oath; in that inexpressible sperm, I washed my hands and my heart of it . . . while bathing in that bath, I felt divinely free from all ill-will, or petulance, or malice of any sort whatsoever.

Squeeze! squeeze! squeeze! all the morning long; I squeezed that sperm till I myself almost melted into it; I squeezed that sperm till a strange sort of insanity came over me. . . . Such an abounding, affectionate, friendly loving feeling did this avocation beget; that at last I was continually squeezing their hands, and looking into their eyes sentimentally; as much as to say, - Oh my dear fellow beings, why should we longer cherish any social acerbities, or know the slightest ill humor or envy! Come; let us squeeze hands all round; nay, let us squeeze ourselves into each other; let us squeeze ourselves universally into the very milk and that sperm of kindness.<sup>51</sup>

A second rather unusual presentation is found in the discussion of what constitutes a "Fast Fish" and a "Loose Fish".







A number of illustrations are used in definition and elaboration of two accepted "laws" pertaining to the whale fishery:

1. A Fast-Fish belongs to the party fast to it.
2. A Loose-Fish is fair game for anybody.

Of these two laws, Melville observes emblematically:

. . . they . . . will, on reflection, be found the fundamentals of all human jurisprudence; for notwithstanding its complicated tracery of sculpture, the Temple of Law, like the Temple of the Philistines, has but two props to stand on.

. . . What are the sinews and souls of Russian serfs and Republican slaves, but Fast-Fish? . . . What to the rapacious landlord is the widow's last mite but a Fast-Fish? . . . What is the Archbishop of Save-soul's income of 100,000 seized from the scant bread and cheese of hundreds of thousands of broken-backed laborers . . . but a Fast-Fish? . . . What was America in 1492 but a Loose-Fish, in which Columbus struck the Spanish standard? . . . What was Poland to the Czar? What Greece to the Turk? What India to England? . . . All Loose-Fish.

What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish? What all men's minds and opinions but Loose-Fish? . . . And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish too?<sup>52</sup>

The verbal picture in this example takes the form of an illustrated argument with humorous overtones. The application is sermonistic in tone and extends its significance to indicate social, political and personal meaning.

As many of the examples which we have already considered show, the reflective interpretations which Melville gave to his emblematic pictures frequently express ideas and concepts indicative of his deepest concerns. Let us consider additional examples which set forth these concerns quite specifically. As we have seen in our



discussion of Transcendentalism, Melville felt the urgency of the voyage of discovery, yet was unsure of its outcome. This idea is expressed in an emblem which draws its picture from an incident when the Pequod and the Albatross, a whaler long absent from home, pass each other without communication. Within the presented picture, Ahab entertains some emblematic thoughts of his own:

At that moment the two wakes were fairly crossed, and instantly, then, in accordance with their singular ways, shoals of small harmless fish, that for some days before had been placidly swimming by our side, darted away with what seemed shuddering fins, and ranged themselves fore and aft with the stranger's flanks. Though in the course of his continual voyagings Ahab must often before have noticed a similar sight, yet, to any monomaniac man, the veriest trifles capriciously carry meanings.

"Swim away from me, do ye?" murmured Ahab, gazing over into the water. There seemed but little in the words but the tone conveyed more of deep helpless sadness than the insane old man had ever before evinced. But turning to the steersman, who thus far had been holding the ship in the wind to diminish her headway, he cried out in his old lion voice, - "Up helm! Keep her off round the world!"

Melville picks up Ahab's defiant cry and attaches his meaning to it rather than to the picture as a whole:

Round the world! . . . Were this world an endless plain, and by sailing eastward we could for ever reach new distances, and discover sights more sweet and strange than any Cyclades or Islands of King Solomon, then there were promise in the voyage. But in pursuit of those far mysteries we dream of, or in tormented chase of that demon phantom that, some time or other, swims before all human hearts; while chasing such over this round globe, they either lead us on in barren mazes or midway leave us whelmed.<sup>53</sup>



Thus, in emblematic form, Melville questions the whole value of the symbolic voyage and suggests that it may end in a meaningless void. The idea which this emblem expresses bears a marked resemblance to the "Narcissus" passage in the first chapter of Moby Dick. The resemblance extends to the diction itself, "tormented" and "phantom" being key words in both interpretations.

Melville's uncertainty found expression in yet another emblem in which the stolid indifference of the deity is reflected upon. The chapter in which it is found, "A Bower in the Arsacides", has a completely imaginative setting reminiscent of parts of Mardi:

It was a wondrous sight. The wood was green as mosses of the Icy Glen; the trees stood high and haughty, feeling their living sap; the industrious earth beneath was a weaver's loom, with a gorgeous carpet on it, whereof the ground-vine tendrils formed the warp and woof, and the living flowers the figures. All the trees, with all their laden branches; all the shrubs, and ferns and grasses; the message-carrying air; all these unceasingly were active. Through the lacings of the leaves, the great sun seemed a flying shuttle weaving the unwearied verdure. Oh, busy weaver! unseen weaver! - pause! - one word! - whither flows the fabric?

Out of the descriptive picture a metaphor rises, the same metaphor which Melville was to use to even greater advantage in the Mat-Maker<sup>54</sup>. It is to this metaphor of the weaver and the loom that the emblematic meaning is attached:

The weaver-god, he weaves; and by that weaving is he deafened, that he hears no mortal voice; and by that humming, we, too, who look on the loom are deafened;





and only when we escape it shall we hear the thousand voices that speak through it. For even so is it in all material factories. The spoken words that are inaudible among the flying spindles; those same words are plainly heard without the walls, bursting from the open casements. Thereby have villainies been detected. Ah mortal! then, be heedful; for so, in all this din of the great world's loom, thy subtlest thinkings may be overheard afar.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of doubts concerning the outcome of the chase or the ultimate meaning of the universe, the compelling urgency of the voyage demands an individual response, though the horrors of sea-faring may contrast strangely with that center of peace and joy which Melville senses is in the soul of every man. In advancing this idea, Melville builds up a picture of the hostility and treachery of the sea through use of pictorial detail, simile analogy and contrast:

. . . not only is the sea such a foe to man who is an alien to it, but it is also a fiend to its own offspring; worse than the Persian host who murdered his own guests; sparing not the creatures which itself hath spawned. Like a savage tigress that tossing in the jungle overlays her own cubs, so the sea dashes even the mightiest whales against the rocks, and leaves them there side by side with the split wrecks of ships. No mercy, no power but its own controls it. Panting and snorting like a mad battle steed that has lost its rider, the masterless ocean overruns the globe.

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began.



The meaning attached to this word picture takes the form of a warning to all those who would become voyagers:

Consider all this; and then turn to this green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half known life. God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!<sup>56</sup>

I think that this example might be termed a "partial" emblem in the light of our discussion in the second chapter. For here the meaning is perceived in what is essentially an archetypal symbol. Though the meaning is deduced from the symbol of the sea so that it may be grasped intellectually, nevertheless the total effect remains somewhat indeterminate and even mysterious.

Something of the same idea is contained in the chapter, "The Grand Armada". A picture is presented of revolving circles of whales, the outer circles protecting the innermost, which is a breeding ground and a place of safety for infant whales and their mothers. Emblematically, Ishmael comments:

And thus, though surrounded by circle upon circle of consternations and affrights, did these inscrutable creatures at the center freely and fearlessly indulge in all peaceful concerns; yea, serenely revelled in dalliance and delight. But even so, amid the tornadoed Atlantic of my being, do I myself still for ever centrally disport in mute calm; and while ponderous planets of unwaning woe revolve around me, deep down and deep inland there I still bathe me in eternal mildness of joy.<sup>57</sup>



In the final analysis, Melville placed his trust in the independent, voyaging mind. The virtue of a strong, individual vitality is expressed in a moralizing emblem which emerges from a discussion of blubber, "this cosy blanketing" of the whale. The picture is of an informative nature:

What would become of a Greenland Whale, say in those shuddering, icy seas of the North, if unsupplied with his cosy surtout? True, other fish are found exceedingly brisk in those Hyperborean waters; but these, be it observed, are your cold-blooded, lungless fish, whose very bellies are refrigerators; creatures, that warm themselves under the lee of an iceberg, as a traveller in winter would bask before an inn fire; whereas, like man, the whale has lungs and warm blood. Freeze his blood and he dies. How wonderful is it then - except after explanation - that this great monster, to whom corporeal warmth is as indispensable as it is to man; how wonderful that he should be found at home, immersed to his lips for life in those Arctic waters! where, when seamen fall overboard, they are sometimes found, months afterwards, perpendicularly frozen into the hearts of fields of ice, as a fly is found glued in amber. But more surprising is it to know, as has been proved by experiment, that the blood of a Polar whale is warmer than that of a Borneo negro in summer.

The application is in the form of an exhortation:

It does seem to me, that herein we see the rare virtue of a strong individual vitality, and the rare virtue of thick walls, and the rare virtue of interior spaciousness. Oh man! admire and model thyself after the whale! Do thou, too, remain warm among ice. Do thou, too live in this world without being of it. Be cool at the equator; keep thy blood fluid at the Pole. Like the great dome of St. Peter's, and like the great whale, retain, O





man! in all seasons a temperature of thine own.

But how easy and how hopeless to teach these fine things! Of erections, how few are domed like St. Peter's! of creatures, how few vast as the whale!<sup>58</sup>

There are two impressive emblematic passages which express Melville's distrust of Idealism and Transcendentalism, which also reveal his recognition of the disparity between appearance and reality. In the first passage, the presented picture is part of a dramatic event which occupies the whole chapter:

. . . several tubs had been filled with the fragrant sperm; when all at once a queer accident happened. Whether it was that Tashtego, that wild Indian, was so heedless and reckless as to let go for a moment his one-handed hold on the great cabled tackles suspending the head; or whether the place where he stood was so treacherous and oozy; or whether the Evil One himself would have it fall out so, without stating his particular reasons; how it was exactly, there is no telling now; but on a sudden, as the eightieth or ninetieth bucket came suckingly up - my God! poor Tashtego - like the twin reciprocating bucket in a veritable well, dropped head-foremost down into this great Tun of Heidelburgh, and with a horrible oily gurgling, went clean out of sight!

The action is continued to the end of the chapter, when after the rescue of Tashtego, Melville reflects upon the meaning, warning all Platonic idealists that their philosophy ends not in sweetness and light but rather in suffocation and death:

Now, had Tashtego perished in that head, it had been a very precious perishing; smothered in the very whitest and daintiest of fragrant spermaceti; confined, hearsed, and tombed in the secret inner chamber and sanctum sanctorum of the whale. Only one sweeter end can readily be recalled - the delicious death of an Ohio honey-hunter, who seeking honey in the crotch of a hollow tree, found such exceeding store of it, that



leaning too far over, it sucked him in, so that he died embalmed. How many, think ye, have likewise fallen into Plato's honey head, and sweetly perished there?<sup>59</sup>

The second emblem of similar meaning presents the picture of the "sunken-eyed young Platonist" meditating while on mast-head duty. In this example, sense and intellect are in perfect balance, held together by the rhythmic prose conveying to the reader the gently rocking movement of the ship. Again Melville warns that through pantheism as through idealism, a person may be lulled to destruction:

. . . perhaps there might have been shoals of them [whales] in the far horizon; but lulled into such an opium-like listlessness of vacant, unconscious reverie is this absent-minded youth by the blending cadence of waves with thoughts, that at last he loses his identity; takes the mystic ocean at his feet for the visible image of that deep, blue, bottomless soul, pervading mankind and nature; and every strange, half-seen, gliding, beautiful thing that eludes him; every dimly-discovered, uprising fin of some undiscernible form, seems to him the embodiment of those elusive thoughts that only people the soul by continually flitting through it. In this enchanted mood, thy spirit ebbs away to whence it came; becomes diffused through time and space; like Cranmer's sprinkled Pantheistic ashes, forming at last a part of every shore the round globe over.

There is no life in thee, now, except that rocking life imparted by a gently rolling ship; by her, borrowed from the sea; by the sea, from the inscrutable tides of God. But while this sleep, this dream is on ye, move your foot or hand an inch; slip your hold at all; and your identity comes back in horror. Over Cartesian vortices you hover. And perhaps, at mid-day, in the fairest weather, with one half-throttled shriek you drop through that transparent air into the summer sea, no more to rise for ever. Heed it well, ye Pantheists!<sup>60</sup>



The whole problem of the relation of appearance to reality had been a matter of constant concern to Melville. The deceptive nature of appearances is reflected upon in a little emblem in the chapter entitled "Ambergris". The picture is of an informative nature:

. . . but ambergris is soft, waxy, and so highly fragrant and spicy, that it is largely used in perfumery, in pastiles, precious candles, hair-powders, and pomatum. The Turks used it in cooking, and also carry it to Mecca, for the same purpose that frankincense is carried to St. Peter's in Rome. Some wine merchants drop a few grains into claret, to flavor it.

Who would think, then, that such fine ladies and gentlemen should regale themselves with an essence found in the inglorious bowels of a sick whale! Yet so it is. By some, ambergris is supposed to be the cause, and by others the effect, of the dyspepsia of the whale.

The meaning attached to this explanatory picture, that decay may have potential beauty, would have been an idea acceptable to the Transcendentalists. Melville's manner of expressing this meaning is reminiscent of the early emblematic style:

Now that the incorruption of this most fragrant ambergris should be found in the heart of such decay; is this nothing? Bethink thee of that saying of St. Paul in Corinthians, about corruption and incorruption; how that we are sown in dishonor, but raised in glory. And likewise call to mind that saying of Paracelsus about what it is that maketh the best musk. Also forget not the strange fact that of all things of ill-savor, Cologne-water, in its rudimental manufacturing stages, is the worst.<sup>61</sup>

In yet another emblem, Melville refers to the struggle between idealism and empiricism, which in his view may be transcended







by the exercise of the symbolic imagination:

The boats were hailed, to tow the whale on the larboard side, where fluke chains and other necessities were already prepared for securing him. . . . As before, the Pequod steeply leaned over towards the Sperm Whale's head, now, by the counterpoise of both heads, she regained her even keel; though sorely strained, you may well believe.

The interpretation follows:

So, when on one side you hoist in Locke's head, you go over that way; but now, on the other side, hoist in Kant's and you come back again; but in very poor plight. Thus, some minds for ever keep trimming boat. Oh, ye foolish! throw all these thunder-heads overboard, and then you will float light and right.<sup>62</sup>

There remain two emblems which are of special significance, for in them we may discern Melville's emblematic technique in its most creative form. First, let us consider "The Monkey-Rope" which has already been referred to in passing.<sup>63</sup> In the words of Ishmael we have this picture:

. . . it was my cheerful duty to attend upon him [Queequeg] while taking the hard-scrabble scramble upon the dead whale's back. You have seen Italian organ-boys holding a dancing-ape by a long cord. Just so, from the ship's steep side, did I hold Queequeg down there in the sea, by what is technically called in the fishery a monkey-rope, attached to a strong strip of canvas belted round his waist.

It was a humorously perilous business for both of us. For, before we proceed further, it must be said that the monkey-rope was fast at both ends; fast to Queequeg's broad canvas belt, and fast to my narrow leather one. So that for better or for worse, we two, for the time, were wedded. . . .



So then, an elongated Siamese ligature united us. Queequeg was my own inseparable twin brother; nor could I any way get rid of the dangerous liabilities which the hempen bond entailed.

So strongly and metaphysically did I conceive of my situation then, that while earnestly watching his motions, I seemed distinctly to perceive that my own individuality was now merged in a joint stock company of two: that my free will had received a mortal wound; and that another's mistake or misfortune might plunge innocent me into unmerited disaster and death. Therefore, I saw that here was a sort of interregnum in Providence; for its even-handed equity never could have sanctioned so gross an injustice. And yet still further pondering - while I jerked him now and then from between the whale and the ship, which would threaten to jam him - still further pondering, I say, I saw that this situation of mine was the precise situation of every mortal that breathes; only, in most cases, he, one way or other, has this Siamese connexion with a plurality of other mortals. If your banker breaks, you snap; if your apothecary by mistake sends you poison in your pills, you die. . . . But handle Queequeg's monkey-rope heedfully as I would, sometimes he jerked it so, that I came very near sliding overboard. Nor could I possibly forget that, do what I would, I only had the management of one end of it.<sup>64</sup>

Here is something quite distinctive in emblem-writing, which has already been noted in a number of examples: the writer's ability to convey a sense of the living, dramatic moment in which a particular experience took place. The metaphysical speculation is perfectly balanced with the image of the monkey-rope. The two levels of perception are interactive, interdependent, intertwined, yet the outline of each remains distinct. Moreover, the reader himself participates in the thinking



process, for the ideas Ishmael expresses are not separated from the act of perceiving and experiencing them.

Secondly, let us consider the emblem of the Loom of Time. As in the previous example, the picture and the interpretation are closely interwoven:

I was the attendant or page of Queequeg, while busy at the mat. As I kept passing and repassing the filling or woof of marline between the long yarns of the warp, using my own hand for the shuttle, and as Queequeg, standing sideways, ever and anon slid his heavy oaken sword between the threads, and idly looking off upon the water, carelessly and unthinkingly drove home every yarn: I say so strange a dreaminess did there then reign all over the ship and all over the sea, only broken by the intermitting dull sound of the sword, that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration, and that vibration merely enough to admit of the crosswise interblending of other threads with its own. This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg's impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; this savage's sword, thought I, which thus finally shapes and fashions both warp and woof; this easy, indifferent sword must be chance - aye, chance, free will, and necessity - no wise incompatible - all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course - its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the





right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turn rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.<sup>65</sup>

Melville perceived that the image of the Loom of Time could be made to carry the full weight of a complex philosophical idea. Yet this is true emblematic art. The picture is clearly drawn, the meaning is established point-by-point from given details, the sense and the intellect are in balance, dependent on one another, yet each retaining its own outline. There is, finally, the conveyed sense of the reader being able to share in the thought process itself as it was actually experienced. This is, I think, Melville's most memorable expression of the emblem in Moby Dick.

There are other emblematic passages in Moby Dick which might claim our attention. Among them would be Father Mapple's sermon; the account of the significance of the Doubloon which mirrored back to every man what he himself was; the vision of the flag which was being nailed to the mast as the Pequod sank; the dramatic description of the quadrant, rods and compass, which Ahab mastered or destroyed. In details too, the emblematic imagination is everywhere in evidence: in the names of the characters, in Queequeg's "holding up that imbecile candle in the heart of that almighty forlornness", in the Jungfrau's bold, hopeful chase after the uncapturable Fin-Back, in the stolid carpenter taken as emblem for



the general stolidity of the visible world. Such passages deserve study as do many more. However, those examples which have been selected and discussed provide, in themselves, an adequate basis for an evaluation of Melville's emblematic imagination as seen in Moby Dick.



## CHAPTER V

### EVALUATION

Melville's emblems, as they are woven into the narrative, give a characteristic texture to the whole of Moby Dick. The examples cited are not isolated passages lost within the complexities of the novel's structure. It is interesting to note that of the twenty-one examples presented in detail in this study, sixteen are used in such a way that the meaning and significance of the chapters in which they appear would be radically altered without them. Melville's favorite use of the emblem seems to have been as an appeal at the end of a chapter, for he entrusts the concluding climax of eleven chapters to the emblematic form. When one considers, in addition, the wealth of emblematic detail, the minor emblems and the partially emblematic nature of the analogical and archetypal symbols, it becomes evident that Melville's imagination created in Moby Dick, a pervasive emblematic quality.

Let us turn, now, to an evaluation of the emblems themselves. Melville's emblematic symbols are artificial in relation to the meaning which they convey, that is, the type of resemblance established between image and meaning is an extrinsic one, image and meaning being forcibly related by





the writer's imagination. The content of Melville's emblems is primarily intellectual, the significance being perceived by the reader on the level of conscious thought. These characteristics are, in general, common to all emblematic writing.

As we may conclude from numerous examples quoted in the preceding chapter, the visual sense is not employed to the exclusion of others, although Melville could and did use a profusion of striking visual pictures. Many of his images gain in richness from his use of the senses of touch and smell or the conveyed sensation of movement. Frequently the statement of the sense side of the twofold approach is not a picture visually conceived, but an educative, informative passage composed of illustrations which are developed by analogy, simile, metaphor and contrast. In such examples, Melville did with language what can not be done with line and color. Sometimes the focal picture is as simple as a particular piece of equipment peculiar to the whaling trade. The greatest number of pictures, however, are dramatic scenes: active, alive, vivid, not extraneous in any way to the narrative but rooted firmly in it. A few of the emblems are short and compact, the picture followed closely by the interpretation. Many are more extended,



the interpretation being attached to a picture or scene which has taken an entire chapter to depict. In some cases, therefore, it has been difficult to isolate the emblematic passage into an independent unity for purposes of discussion. From my point of view, this latter feature has presented a problem; from the point of view of the whole of Moby Dick, it represents a unifying strength.

In contrast with the wooden symbols of the early emblem-writers, Melville's emblematic images seldom appear contrived or artificial. The images, selected from the text of the narrative action, seem credible and natural by virtue of their rightful place within the total work. A true emblem-writer would arbitrarily select an image to express the abstract idea he had in mind; he would follow the technique of reducing abstract ideas to concrete terms. Melville, on the other hand, saw the concrete terms first, then freed his imagination to lead him to the final expressed meaning. Thus, in Moby Dick Melville reversed the customary emblematic procedure in a manner consistent with the transcendentalist method of finding meaning through exploration.

There are several points of interest regarding Melville's



interpretations. First, the image is more often a focus for Melville's reflective comment, than a picture whose significance is to be observed point-by-point. Occasionally there is a correlation of picture detail with meaning, but examples of this sort are in the minority. More characteristically, Melville attached one major idea to each emblematic picture. We have noted that the pictures themselves contain little or no material extraneous to the narrative. However, in the interpretations, Melville frequently used Biblical authority, classical material, literary references or philosophical allusions.

Secondly, Melville's interpretations are not moral or religious in the manner of early emblems, for he was not propounding accepted beliefs or known truths. His emblems more frequently express bewilderment, doubt and uncertainty. They speak of the perilous character of life, of the deceptive nature of appearances, of the complexity of man's existence, of the stolidity of the universe, of philosophical and metaphysical concepts. As our cited examples show, the applied meaning is sometimes personal, sometimes objective.

Melville obviously did not follow the technique of early emblem-writers. Yet his emblems do satisfy the principles of definition proposed in the first chapter. First, both sides





of the twofold approach to meaning, sense and intellect, are always present. The picture, drawn out from the narrative, appears in a variety of flexible and unusual forms. The interpretations are original with Melville, and deal with his deepest concerns, the same concerns which dominate the narrative as a whole. Though technically the cited passages cannot be termed true emblems, they are demonstrably excellent examples of the emblematic imagination at work in dramatic narrative.

Secondly, in the examples cited, the meaning is consciously equated with the picture, in whole or in part, but the meaning and the image do not merge or fuse to the point where the independent identity of either is lost. In this connection, Melville contributed something new. Not only are sense impression and reflective interpretation in balance; they are at times held together by the act of perception itself. In examples such as *The Monkey-Rope*, *A Squeeze of the Hand*, *The Masthead Platonist*, *The Loom of Time*, the reader shares in Ishmael's developing consciousness and thereby re-creates a present, living, immediate moment. Melville, then, overcame that "disjunction of faculties" which had been a serious weakness in early emblematic writing, by skilfully combining sense and intellect in one image, then breathing life and immediacy into it. In this respect he passed far beyond earlier emblematic technique.



Melville used the emblematic art within the limits set by our principles of definition, but he gave to it something of his own: a richness of sense imagery, an originality of interpretation, an authenticity of style. It would be unfortunate, however, to think of Melville as a writer of individual emblems, for the emblematic expression in Moby Dick is rather the result of a consistent habit of mind which could not look at anything whether it be a whale line, a floating carcass, or a monkey-rope, without perceiving in it "some certain significance". In some instances the significance is assigned impulsively and spontaneously, in others it is more painstakingly worked out.

Melville's emblematic imagination imparted depth, variety and symbolic meaning to Moby Dick. It had shown itself for the first time, uncertainly, in Mardi. It had expressed itself with growing strength and purpose in White Jacket. At Hawthorne's touch it had burst into a constant flame which illumines, heightens and transforms the setting and events of Ishmael's symbolic voyage.



Footnotes

- 1 Herman Melville, Moby Dick or, The Whale, ed. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent, New York, Hendricks House, 1952, p. 427.
- 2 A Collection of Emblemes, 1635 edition, p. 90. As quoted in Rosemary Freeman, English Emblem Books, London, Chatto and Windus, 1948, p. 14.
- 3 Geoffrey Whitney, A Choice of Emblemes, 1586 edition. Reproduced in Freeman, ibid., plate opposite p. 18.
- 4 From Preface, quoted in Freeman, ibid., p. 57.
- 5 It perhaps should be noted that the emblematic mode of expression had been current in medieval literature on the Continent from at least the time of St. Augustine.
- 6 Dante's Inferno, translator Laurence Binyon, London, MacMillan and Co. Ltd., 1935, pp. 327-29.
- 7 Hamlet, II.2., ll. 515-19. This example occurs in a passage in which Shakespeare was attempting a specimen of old-fashioned drama.
- 8 Sonnet CXVI, ll. 9-12.
- 9 Specifically for this study, Francis Quarles, George Herbert and John Bunyan.
- 10 The emblem under discussion appears in Roberta F. Brinkley, English Poetry of the XVIIth Century, New York, W. W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1942, pp. 233-35. She identifies the verbal description of the picture as from the pen of Browning in a letter dated August 19, 1846.
- 11 Brinkley, ibid., p. 277.
- 12 Freeman, op. cit., p. 163.
- 13 In Bunyan, as in Dante, emblematic symbolism is an element of the allegory as a whole. The Pilgrim's Progress and The Inferno might therefore be designated as emblematic allegory, just as the term archetypal allegory might describe a work such as Franz Kafka's The Castle.





- 14 John Bunyan, Grace Abounding and The Pilgrim's Progress,  
Cambridge University Press, 1907, pp. 163-64.
- 15 Ibid., pp. 161-62.
- 16 Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub and Gulliver's Travels,  
London, Oxford University Press, 1929, pp. 336-37.
- 17 Ibid., p. 188.
- 18 Ibid., p. 190.
- 19 Melville, op. cit., pp. 307-08.
- 20 William E. Sedgwick, Herman Melville, Cambridge, Mass.,  
Harvard University Press, 1944, p. 134.
- 21 Melville, op. cit., pp. 189-90.
- 22 William York Tindall, The Literary Symbol, New York, Colum-  
bia University Press, 1955, p. 22.
- 23 Leon Howard, Herman Melville, Los Angeles, University of Cali-  
fornia Press, Berkeley, 1951, p. 138.
- 24 Romances of Herman Melville, New York, The Pickwick Publishers  
Inc., 1929, p. 1340.
- 25 Ibid., p. 1344.
- 26 Ibid., p. 1111.
- 27 Ibid., p. 1230.
- 28 Ibid., p. 1342.
- 29 Ibid., p. 1186.
- 30 Ibid., p. 1342.
- 31 Melville, op. cit., p. 193.
- 32 Ibid., p. 310.
- 33 Ibid., p. 427.
- 34 Ibid., p. 6.



35 Ibid., p. 307.

36 Ibid., pp. 161-62. The question may well be raised: can we take Ahab's or Ishmael's ideas in these quotations for Melville's own? I think that, with reference to the instances cited, the answer is yes. In the six quotations used to illustrate Melville's attitude to Transcendentalism, two are speeches of Ahab's, one is a comment of Ishmael's, and the remaining three are the author's own words unassigned to any character but supposedly Ishmael's in that he is the narrator. By way of clarification it should be noted that as the narrative proceeds, the minds of Melville and Ishmael seem to merge. Melville, writing in the third person, frequently "takes over" from Ishmael, the narrator, until it becomes impossible to distinguish between them. One must be more cautious in any attempt to identify Melville's ideas too closely with Ahab's, but with respect to the particular ideas under discussion in this section, Ahab's thoughts correspond with those of Melville and Ishmael, but are expressed in a more dramatic and passionate way. The truth of this statement would tend to be supported by external evidence (e. g. correspondence) which reveals the nature of Melville's thinking at the time he was writing and re-writing Moby Dick.

37 Eleanor Melville Metcalf, Herman Melville, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1953. Letter from Duyckinck to his wife dated August 7, 1850, quoted p. 84.

38 Howard, op. cit., p. 168.

39 This should not be taken to mean that Hawthorne was the only writer who fired Melville's imagination at this time. Melville had been reading Shakespeare in 1849, and Shakespeare's influence on Moby Dick is extensive in matters of form, characterization, construction and imaginative quality. He had also been reading Thomas Browne, many of whose ideas (e.g. his concept of microcosm and macrocosm) were congenial to those of Emerson and the Transcendentalists. Thomas Carlyle's influence on Moby Dick is obvious also. Hawthorne acted as a catalyst upon all these elements in Melville's mind at the time of writing.

40 Melville, op. cit., pp. 1-3. This is an example of the way in which an archetypal image may be susceptible to emblematic interpretation.



- 41 Ibid., p. 281.
- 42 Ibid., p. 220.
- 43 See p. 53 below.
- 44 See p. 50 below.
- 45 See p. 53 below.
- 46 Melville, op. cit., pp. 319-20.
- 47 See above pp. 13-14.
- 48 Melville, op. cit., pp. 421-23.
- 49 Ibid., p. 426.
- 50 Ibid., pp. 371-72.
- 51 Ibid., pp. 414-15.
- 52 Ibid., pp. 395-96.
- 53 Ibid., pp. 235-36.
- 54 See pp. 55-56 below.
- 55 Melville, op. cit., pp. 446-47.
- 56 Ibid., p. 274.
- 57 Ibid., p. 387.
- 58 Ibid., p. 306.
- 59 Ibid., pp. 340 and 343.
- 60 Ibid., pp. 156-57.
- 61 Ibid., p. 407.
- 62 Ibid., p. 326.
- 63 See pp. 37-38 above.
- 64 Melville, op. cit., pp. 318-19.
- 65 Ibid., pp. 212-13.





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